

# Massachusetts

## Curriculum for Schools to Reduce Prevalence of Obesity

### Public Health Problem

Between 1980 and 1999, the prevalence of overweight nearly tripled (from 5% to 14%) among adolescents and nearly doubled (from 7% to 13%) in children 6-11 years of age. This finding forecasts an increase in chronic disease as the younger generation ages. Root causes include insufficient physical activity in relation to excess calories consumed.

### Taking Action

The Harvard University Prevention Research Center (PRC) developed Planet Health, an interdisciplinary curriculum created to improve the health and well-being of students in public middle schools. The curriculum was designed to fit easily into language, math, science, social studies, and physical education classes. The goals were to increase consumption of fruits and vegetables and physical activity, and decrease consumption of high-fat foods and television viewing.

The Planet Health program was initially implemented in 10 public middle schools over a two year period. Boston Public Schools (BPS) expressed interest in disseminating Planet Health after the program was found to significantly reduce television viewing for both girls and boys, and significantly decrease the prevalence of obesity among girls. A partnership was formed to pilot test how feasible and sustainable the curriculum could be in public school settings where resources are constrained. The BPS selected a sample of six inner-city middle schools to participate, while the PRC provided the Planet Health curriculum, training workshops for more than 100 teachers, small stipends for teacher coordinators within each of the participating schools, and research expertise to assess diffusion of the program.

### Implications and Impact

The Planet Health curriculum succeeded in significantly reducing television viewing for both boys and girls, and significantly decreasing the prevalence of obesity for girls. The Planet Health curriculum is now used in hundreds of middle schools in the Boston area, and 2,000 copies of the curriculum have been purchased by interested parties in 48 states and 20 countries. An independent economic analysis found that every dollar spent on the program in middle school translates to a savings of \$1.20 in medical costs and lost wages when the children reach middle age.

## Contact Information

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